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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SHANGHAI 000047

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SUBJECT: WENZHOU: CHINA'S "JERUSALEM"

REF: A) SHANGHAI 44, B) SHANGHAI 45

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a December 14-15 visit to the coastal city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, Congenoffs visited three official churches in the city and discussed religious issues with a few local citizens. Congenoff also discussed Wenzhou's religious situation with a researcher in Shanghai who specialized in Protestant communities, as well as Shanghai Catholic Bishop Jin. All agreed that Wenzhou had a dynamic religious situation and that the number of believers had increased. They attributed this increase to the independent spirit of the people and the hands-off attitude of the local government. Cables on Wenzhou's economic development were reported reftels. End summary.

Local Officials' Refuse To Discuss Religion

¶2. (C) Wenzhou is famous for its entrepreneurial-fueled economic development and its religious communities. While local officials were eager to discuss economic issues (reftels), they refused to discuss religious issues and denied requests for meetings with the local Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and religious leaders. Congenoffs trip was arranged by CHINT President Nan Cunhui. CHINT is an electrical equipment manufacturer and one of the largest enterprises in Wenzhou (reftel b). This was not the first time that Consulate employees had been denied access to religious leaders in Wenzhou, requests by previous CGs and Poloffs were also denied, most recently in April 2005. When Congenoffs raised religious issues during a meeting with Vice Mayor Chen Hongfeng, he merely said that the local government policies were in line with national policies. (Note: Chen's portfolio included religious affairs. End note.) Fred Hong, a legal advisor to CHINT, raised Congenoffs requests for religious meetings during a conversation with Congenoffs on December 14. He was not surprised that the requests for meetings on religious issues had been denied. He noted that religious groups in Wenzhou operated

with little government interference as evidenced by the abundance of registered churches. He suggested that local government officials might be worried that by discussing the situation with foreigners, this would lead to more attention from Beijing, thus jeopardizing the current situation.

Churches In Every Neighborhood

13. (C) Despite the local government's lack of assistance, Congenoffs were able to get a glimpse of the vibrant religious situation in Wenzhou. Wenzhou is known to many Christians as the Jerusalem of China because of the large number of churches in the city. During Congenoffs' trip, we found churches in almost every neighborhood and had no problems obtaining directions from locals to nearby churches. Several official churches were even marked in the local tourist map. According to the Bible Society International website (www.biblesociety.org), there were 1,180 registered churches in Wenzhou with 31 ordained pastors and 132 non-ordained pastors. (Note: Bible Society International jointly owns Amity Printing Press which is responsible for printing all official Protestant bibles in China. See reftel. End note.) The local Chinese Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement (CCC/TSPM) also built a training center for lay members of the church, which provided instruction on preaching, hymns and music studies, congregation management and laws or religious practice. The CCC/TSPM also established an old people's home in 1992 which takes care of Christians over 60 years of age.

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14. (C) Congenoffs visited two registered Protestant churches and one registered Catholic church. The Catholic church served as the Headquarters of the Catholic Patriotic Association and known as the Central Catholic Church of Wenzhou. Its sanctuary and main building was built by Polish missionaries in 1848, but is currently not useable for structural reasons caused by land-subsidence caused by a high rise construction project on land adjacent to the church. Other, old buildings built by Italian missionaries were still in use. The church currently held services in recently-constructed temporary building built using donations from outside of China. This facility, built on a piece of land prone to flooding, could hold approximately 1,000 worshippers. According to a church volunteer by the name of Xu Yongli, the church would need at least three million USD to fully repair the church and this money would need to come from abroad. Plans for the renovated sanctuary called for a seating capacity of 3000 congregants. The church held four daily services, and had a growing congregation with university students and young professionals making up the bulk of new members. Xu said that while its congregation was one of the fastest-growing Catholic congregations in Wenzhou, it was not growing as fast as some Protestant churches.

15. (C) Congenoffs also visited the Cheng Xi Church which is an officially-recognized protestant church. It held three services every Sunday and had bible study classes on Monday and Friday. Next to the church was a Christian bookstore that was open Monday to Saturday from 8:00 to 5:00 PM. Besides copies of the Bible, New Testament, and writings of St. Francis of Assisi and others, the bookstore sold Christian music CDs and DVDs, as well as a Chinese-language edition of "The Purpose Driven Life." Congenoffs also visited the Flower Garden Lane Church, another officially recognized Protestant church. The three-story church was located in a poor area of Wenzhou and, according to the Bible Society International website, regularly received 600

believers for evening prayer services. During Congenoffs' visit, volunteers, most of whom were women, were busy preparing for a Christmas party that evening. A volunteer provided a tour and said that the congregation consisted of people of all ages and evenly divided between male and female congregants. She said that most of the congregants were Wenzhou people, although there were a few migrant laborers who came from other cities.

Why Wenzhou?

¶6. (C) A few contacts were willing to discuss the religious situation in Wenzhou. CHINT Vice President Lin Kefu during a lunch on December 15 noted that there were churches throughout the city. He said while most CHINT employees were not religious since they were young and not from Wenzhou, the employees who came from Wenzhou were very religious. These employees had no problems attending religious services at nearby churches. He attributed the growth of Christianity in Wenzhou to the fact that Wenzhou was a port city, with more exposure to foreigners. In addition, many Wenzhou people traveled abroad for business reasons and while abroad, became Christians. Many of these people brought back Christianity when they returned to Wenzhou.

¶7. (C) In a conversation with Congenoff on December 18, East China University of Politics and Law Professor Li Feng said there were historical reasons behind the growth of Protestants in Wenzhou. Li was doing his post-doctorial work at Fudan University and had written a book on Protestants in Wenzhou. According to Li, Wenzhou had a long history of welcoming foreign missionaries. The Methodists and Seventh Day Adventists sent many missionaries to the area and were very successful in converting Wenzhou people. In addition, many of the same factors that led Wenzhou to become a haven for entrepreneurs contributed to the growth of Christianity. Wenzhou was historically very poor and isolated. It was shielded by mountains and Beijing had difficulties exerting control over it. Therefore, Wenzhou people learned not to rely on Beijing and

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became very independent and free-thinking. This made it easier for Wenzhou people to practice Christianity without interference from the central government. Li added that the Wenzhou language was also helpful in this area. The Wenzhou dialect was very difficult and few people outside of Wenzhou understood the dialect. Since it was almost impossible for outsiders to understand the language, Wenzhou people had been able to communicate more freely with each other.

¶8. (C) Li added that the hands-off attitude of the local government also contributed to the growth of religions in Wenzhou. The Wenzhou government, in general, was very open and did not interfere in the lives of local citizens unless citizens were involved in political movements or threatened national security, such as the Falun Gong. The local government had a mixed record in controlling religious groups. For example, a few years ago, the local government became concerned about Sunday Schools because they provided religious education to minors. The local government tried to force churches to cancel Sunday School classes. The churches fought back and brought the issue to local courts. The courts ruled in favor of the churches. Li said that since this incident, the Wenzhou government has been reluctant to take on local churches. He added that many local government officials were also Christians and supported the churches. Some CCC/TSPM officials were genuine believers and came from the community. (Note: Per the

Bible Society International website, the Vice-Chairman of the Wenzhou CCC was also the pastor at the Flower Garden Lane Church. End note.) When possible, these officials sided with local churches.

¶9. (C) He said that it was difficult to estimate the number of unregistered churches in Wenzhou. The CCC/TSPM essentially controlled the process since any church that wanted to register was required to obtain the approval of the local CCC/TSPM representative. He said that there were two types of unregistered churches. The first type had never registered and opposed CCC/TSPM and the central government's control over religions. The second type used to belong to the CCC/TSPM, but had separated from the official church. The leaders of these churches resented the CCC/TSPM's control and did not want to share power and resources with the CCC/TSPM.

¶10. (C) Li noted that other religions in Wenzhou were also increasing in popularity and, in particular, the number of Buddhists and Catholics were growing quickly. Like the Protestants, Wenzhou Buddhists and Catholics were also very independent. In a meeting with Poloff on November 30, Shanghai Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian had a similar view about Wenzhou Catholics (reftel). He said that there were 120,000 Catholics in Wenzhou who were evenly divided between the official and underground church. The Bishop of Wenzhou, James Lin Xili, was not recognized by Beijing and had been arrested in September ¶1999. According to Jin, Bishop Lin suffered from Alzheimer's disease. In addition, two underground priests from the diocese were charged in November 2006 for attempting to illegally visit the Vatican. Li shared Bishop Jin's view on Catholics in Wenzhou and said that it was impossible for the local government to completely and continuously control religious groups in Wenzhou. There were too many groups and they were becoming too powerful.
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